Introduction to Buddhism

By Thomas Knierim

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About Buddhism

The greatest achievement is selflessness.
The greatest worth is self-mastery.
The greatest quality is seeking to serve others.
The greatest precept is continual awareness.
The greatest medicine is the emptiness of everything.
The greatest action is not conforming with the worlds ways.
The greatest magic is transmuting the passions.
The greatest generosity is non-attachment.
The greatest goodness is a peaceful mind.
The greatest patience is humility.
The greatest effort is not concerned with results.
The greatest meditation is a mind that lets go.
The greatest wisdom is seeing through appearances.

Atisha (11th century Tibetan Buddhist master)

The Buddha's Life

Siddhartha Gautama, ca. 563 - ca. 483 BC

Siddhartha Gautama lived in the present-day border area between India and Nepal in the 6th century before Christ; his exact birth date is unknown. Because the life of the historical Buddha is inseparable from legend, the following "résumé" is not meant to be a historically exact biography, but a short life story based on what has been passed down by generations. The dates are based on present day historians' mainstream view.

563 BC – Birth

Siddhartha Gautama is born in Lumbini, near the Nepalese-Indian border to his father, King Suddhodana, ruler of the Sakya tribe, and his mother, Queen Mayadevi. The father gives his son the name of Siddhartha (=the one who obtains success and prosperity), his second name is Gautama (=name of the clan).

Seers predict that Siddhartha will either become a Universal Monarch or a Buddha. Asita, the wisest of the seers, is sure that he will become a Buddha (=one who has supreme knowledge). His mother dies seven days after the birth.

563-547 BC

Siddhartha spends his childhood in the palace of his father at Kapilavastu, Southern Nepal, where he is raised by his aunt Mahaprajapati until the age of seven. In his early childhood, during a ploughing ceremony, Siddhartha makes his first unprecedented spiritual experience, where in the course of meditation he develops the first jhana (=meditative absorption) through concentration.

As a young boy he learns the skills of a warrior, including the technical and athletic skills of man-to-man fight. Siddhartha is trained in spiritual disciplines and becomes proficient in the art of archery.

547 BC

At the early age of sixteen, he marries his beautiful cousin Princess Yasodhara, who is of equal age.

547-533 BC

The young prince spends thirteen more years together with his wife in the royal court of his father. Three palaces are built for him, one for the cold season, one for the hot season, and one for the rainy season. Siddhartha enjoys the lavish court life while his father is trying to screen him from all troubles and worries. A son is born when Siddhartha is in his late twenties.

533 BC – The Four Sights

Despite of the amenities of life, Siddhartha is not satisfied with the mere enjoyment of fleeting pleasures due to his inquiring and contemplative nature. One day, he leaves the palace for an excursion and there he encounters what so far has been purposely veiled from him:

He sees a decrepit old man, a diseased person, a corpse being cremated, and a sadhu (=holy man, hermit). Siddhartha realises that there is old age, sickness, and death, and that people ultimately have little control over their lives. The fourth sight provides the inspiration that leads to a dramatic change in his life.

533 BC – The Renunciation

In the night of his 29th birthday, Siddhartha gives up his life as a prince and secretly leaves the court while everyone is asleep. He travels far and crosses the river Anoma, where he shaves his hair and hands over his princely garments to his groom Channa, with instructions to return them to the palace.

533-528 BC

The Bodhisattva (=future Buddha), who once lived in luxury, becomes a penniless and homeless wanderer. He leads a life of self-mortification and spiritual study, becomes first a disciple of several then famous Brahman teachers, and later attracts his own disciples.

After a long and exhausting period of searching and self-mortification, he finally becomes disillusioned with the Indian caste system, Hindu asceticism, and the religious doctrines of his time. He gives up the ascetic life and loses all of his disciples as a result. Nevertheless, he continues his search for truth through the practice of meditation.

April/May 528 BC – Enlightenment

While meditating under a Bodhi tree in Bodh-Gaya, south of Gaya in the state of Bihar, India, the Bodhisattva experiences the Great Enlightenment, which reveals to him the way of salvation from suffering. He spends seven weeks meditating in the vicinity of the site of the Bodhi tree and attains the status of a fully realised Buddha at the age of 35.

June/July 528 BC – First Sermon

Buddha finds his former five disciples in Benares. In his first sermon he teaches them what will become the gist of Buddhism. Upon hearing it, one of the disciples instantly attains the status of an arhat (=one with enlightened wisdom). This event marks the beginning of the Buddhist teaching and his disciples become the first five members of the sangha (=Buddhist order).

528-527 BC

During a short period of time, Buddha establishes a great reputation in western Hindustan by converting thousands of people to the dhamma (=the Buddhist teaching). People hear the dhamma delivered either by himself, or by the monks of his order. During this time he delivers the fire sermon.

March 527 BC

The Buddha briefly returns to the palace of his father to convert the royal family and ordains many of the Sakya tribe.

523 BC

Four years later Siddhartha's father, King Suddhodana, dies. Buddha returns to the palace and Mahaprajapati, where Buddha's aunt -upon meeting Buddha- becomes the first woman to ordain, despite of the protest of some contemporaries. From this moment on women were admitted to the sangha. According to Indian tradition, however, they were separated and under the authority of male monks.

523-483 BC

In the 45 years following his enlightenment, Buddha travels around Northern India to teach the tenets of Buddhism. He is extremely successful and attracts first thousands, then ten thousands, and later hundred thousands of people from all walks of life, who voluntarily decide to follow his teachings, the dhamma. During the monsoon, when travelling becomes difficult due to the weather, Buddha and his close followers interrupt their journey. During these months, monks, as well as laypeople, receive the teachings at a site selected for retreat. One such site is Sravasti in Nepal, which has become very famous since then.

Buddha's success does not only attract admirers, but also provokes envy and ill will. Several attempts are made on his life, but all of them fail. Although he is being criticised and defamed, this does not affect the popularity of his teaching.

483 BC – Death and Pari-Nirvana

Having achieved the goal of spreading the teaching to the greatest number of people, Buddha dies at the age of eighty years, as a result of food poisoning. He dies in a forest near Kusinagara, Nepal, in the company of his followers reclining on a bed where he speaks his last words: "All compounded things are ephemeral; work diligently on your salvation." With these words on his lips, he passes into the state of Pari-Nirvana.

The Four Nobles Truths

1. **Life means suffering.**
2. **The origin of suffering is attachment.**
3. **The cessation of suffering is attainable.**
4. **The path to the cessation of suffering.**

1. Life means suffering.

To live means to suffer, because the human nature is not perfect and neither is the world we live in. During our lifetime, we inevitably have to endure physical suffering such as pain, sickness, injury, tiredness, old age, and eventually death; and we have to endure psychological suffering like sadness, fear, frustration, disappointment, and depression. Although there are different degrees of suffering and there are also positive experiences in life that we perceive as the opposite of suffering, such as ease, comfort and happiness, life in its totality is imperfect and incomplete, because our world is subject to impermanence. This means we are never able to keep permanently what we strive for, and just as happy moments pass by, we ourselves and our loved ones will pass away one day, too.

2. The origin of suffering is attachment.

The origin of suffering is attachment to transient things and the ignorance thereof. Transient things do not only include the physical objects that surround us, but also ideas, and -in a greater sense- all objects of our perception. Ignorance is the lack of understanding of how our mind is attached to impermanent things. The reasons for suffering are desire, passion, ardour, pursuit of wealth and prestige, striving for fame and popularity, or in short: craving and clinging. Because the objects of our attachment are transient, their loss is inevitable, thus suffering will necessarily follow. Objects of attachment also include the idea of a "self" which is a delusion, because there is no abiding self. What we call "self" is just an imagined entity, and we are merely a part of the ceaseless becoming of the universe.

3. The cessation of suffering is attainable.

The cessation of suffering can be attained through nirodha. Nirodha means the unmaking of sensual craving and conceptual attachment. The third noble truth expresses the idea that suffering can be ended by attaining dispassion. Nirodha extinguishes all forms of clinging and attachment. This means that suffering can be overcome through human activity, simply by removing the cause of suffering. Attaining and perfecting dispassion is a process of many levels that ultimately results in the state of Nirvana. Nirvana means freedom from all worries, troubles, complexes, fabrications and ideas. Nirvana is not comprehensible for those who have not attained it.

4. The path to the cessation of suffering.

There is a path to the end of suffering - a gradual path of self-improvement, which is described more detailed in the Eightfold Path. It is the middle way between the two extremes of excessive self-indulgence (hedonism) and excessive self-mortification (asceticism); and it leads to the end of the cycle of rebirth. The latter quality discerns it from other paths which are merely "wandering on the wheel of becoming", because these do not have a final object. The path to the end of suffering can extend over many lifetimes, throughout which every individual rebirth is subject to karmic conditioning. Craving, ignorance, delusions, and its effects will disappear gradually, as progress is made on the path.

The Noble Eightfold Path

1. Right View	Wisdom
2. Right Intention	
3. Right Speech	Ethical Conduct
4. Right Action	
5. Right Livelihood	
6. Right Effort	Mental Development
7. Right Mindfulness	
8. Right Concentration	

The Noble Eightfold Path describes the way to the end of suffering, as it was laid out by Siddhartha Gautama. It is a practical guideline to ethical and mental development with the goal of freeing the individual from attachments and delusions; and it finally leads to understanding the truth about all things. Together with the Four Noble Truths it constitutes the gist of Buddhism. Great emphasis is put on the practical aspect, because it is only through practice that one can attain a higher level of existence and finally reach Nirvana. The eight aspects of the path are not to be understood as a sequence of single steps, instead they are highly interdependent principles that have to be seen in relationship with each other.

1. Right View

Right view is the beginning and the end of the path, it simply means to see and to understand things as they really are and to realise the Four Noble Truth. As such, right view is the cognitive aspect of wisdom. It means to see things through, to grasp the impermanent and imperfect nature of worldly objects and ideas, and to understand the law of karma and karmic conditioning. Right view is not necessarily an intellectual capacity, just as wisdom is not just a matter of intelligence. Instead, right view is attained, sustained, and enhanced through all capacities of mind. It begins with the intuitive insight that all beings are subject to suffering and it ends with complete understanding of the true nature of all things. Since our view of the world forms our thoughts and our actions, right view yields right thoughts and right actions.

2. Right Intention

While right view refers to the cognitive aspect of wisdom, right intention refers to the volitional aspect, i.e. the kind of mental energy that controls our actions. Right intention can be described best as commitment to ethical and mental self-improvement. Buddha distinguishes three types of right intentions: 1. the intention of renunciation, which means resistance to the pull of desire, 2. the intention of good will, meaning resistance to feelings of anger and aversion, and 3. the intention of harmlessness, meaning not to think or act cruelly, violently, or aggressively, and to develop compassion.

3. Right Speech

Right speech is the first principle of ethical conduct in the eightfold path. Ethical conduct is viewed as a guideline to moral discipline, which supports the other principles of the path.

This aspect is not self-sufficient, however, essential, because mental purification can only be achieved through the cultivation of ethical conduct. The importance of speech in the context of Buddhist ethics is obvious: words can break or save lives, make enemies or friends, start war or create peace. Buddha explained right speech as follows: 1. to abstain from false speech, especially not to tell deliberate lies and not to speak deceitfully, 2. to abstain from slanderous speech and not to use words maliciously against others, 3. to abstain from harsh words that offend or hurt others, and 4. to abstain from idle chatter that lacks purpose or depth. Positively phrased, this means to tell the truth, to speak friendly, warm, and gently and to talk only when necessary.

4. Right Action

The second ethical principle, right action, involves the body as natural means of expression, as it refers to deeds that involve bodily actions. Unwholesome actions lead to unsound states of mind, while wholesome actions lead to sound states of mind. Again, the principle is explained in terms of abstinence: right action means 1. to abstain from harming sentient beings, especially to abstain from taking life (including suicide) and doing harm intentionally or delinquently, 2. to abstain from taking what is not given, which includes stealing, robbery, fraud, deceitfulness, and dishonesty, and 3. to abstain from sexual misconduct. Positively formulated, right action means to act kindly and compassionately, to be honest, to respect the belongings of others, and to keep sexual relationships harmless to others. Further details regarding the concrete meaning of right action can be found in the Precepts.

5. Right Livelihood

Right livelihood means that one should earn one's living in a righteous way and that wealth should be gained legally and peacefully. The Buddha mentions four specific activities that harm other beings and that one should avoid for this reason: 1. dealing in weapons, 2. dealing in living beings (including raising animals for slaughter as well as slave trade and prostitution), 3. working in meat production and butchery, and 4. selling intoxicants and poisons, such as alcohol and drugs. Furthermore any other occupation that would violate the principles of right speech and right action should be avoided.

6. Right Effort

Right effort can be seen as a prerequisite for the other principles of the path. Without effort, which is in itself an act of will, nothing can be achieved, whereas misguided effort distracts the mind from its task, and confusion will be the consequence. Mental energy is the force behind right effort; it can occur in either wholesome or unwholesome states. The same type of energy that fuels desire, envy, aggression, and violence can on the other side fuel self-discipline, honesty, benevolence, and kindness. Right effort is detailed in four types of endeavours that rank in ascending order of perfection: 1. to prevent the arising of not yet arisen unwholesome states, 2. to abandon unwholesome states that have already arisen, 3. to arouse wholesome states that have not yet arisen, and 4. to maintain and perfect wholesome states already arisen.

7. Right Mindfulness

Right mindfulness is the controlled and perfected faculty of cognition. It is the mental ability to see things as they are, with clear consciousness. Usually, the cognitive process begins with an impression induced by perception, or by a thought, but then it does not stay with the mere impression. Instead, we almost always conceptualise sense impressions and thoughts immediately. We interpret them and set them in relation to other thoughts and experiences,

which naturally go beyond the facticity of the original impression. The mind then posits concepts, joins concepts into constructs, and weaves those constructs into complex interpretative schemes. All this happens only half consciously, and as a result we often see things obscured. Right mindfulness is anchored in clear perception and it penetrates impressions without getting carried away. Right mindfulness enables us to be aware of the process of conceptualisation in a way that we actively observe and control the way our thoughts go. Buddha accounted for this as the *four foundations of mindfulness*: 1. contemplation of the body, 2. contemplation of feeling (repulsive, attractive, or neutral), 3. contemplation of the state of mind, and 4. contemplation of the phenomena.

8. Right Concentration

The eighth principle of the path, right concentration, refers to the development of a mental force that occurs in natural consciousness, although at a relatively low level of intensity, namely concentration. Concentration in this context is described as one-pointedness of mind, meaning a state where all mental faculties are unified and directed onto one particular object. Right concentration for the purpose of the eightfold path means wholesome concentration, i.e. concentration on wholesome thoughts and actions. The Buddhist method of choice to develop right concentration is through the practice of meditation. The meditating mind focuses on a selected object. It first directs itself onto it, then sustains concentration, and finally intensifies concentration step by step. Through this practice it becomes natural to apply elevated levels concentration also in everyday situations.

The Precepts

The precepts are a condensed form of Buddhist ethical practice. They are often compared with the ten commandments of Christianity, however, the precepts are different in two respects: First, they are to be taken as recommendations, not commandments. This means the individual is encouraged to use his/her own intelligence to apply these rules in the best possible way. Second, it is the spirit of the precepts -not the text- that counts, hence, the guidelines for ethical conduct must be seen in the larger context of the Eightfold Path.

The first five precepts are mandatory for every Buddhist, although the fifth precept is often not observed, because it bans the consumption of alcohol. Precepts no. six to ten are laid out for those in preparation for monastic life and for devoted lay people unattached to families. The *eight precepts* put together number eight and nine and omit the tenth. Lay people may observe the eight precepts on Buddhist festival days. Ordained Theravada monks undertake no less than 227 precepts, which are not listed here.

I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from ...

1. ...harming living beings.
2. ...taking things not freely given.
3. ...sexual misconduct.
4. ...false speech.
5. ...intoxicating drinks and drugs causing heedlessness.
6. ...taking untimely meals.
7. ...dancing, singing, music and watching grotesque mime.
8. ...use of garlands, perfumes and personal adornment.
9. ...use of high seats.
10. ...accepting gold or silver.

(adapted from The Word of the Buddha, Niyamatolika, The Buddhist Publication Society, 1971, p xii)

The above phrasing of the precepts is very concise and leaves much open to interpretation. One might ask, for example, what exactly constitutes false speech, what are untimely meals, what constitutes sexual misconduct, or whether a glass of wine causes heedlessness. And, the grotesque mime watching of the seventh precept sounds perhaps a bit outdated. The Buddhist master Thich Nath Hanh has formulated The Five Mindfulness Trainings, which are an adaptation of the first five Buddhist precepts. These are practice by Buddhists of the Lam Te Dhyana school. By virtue of their sensible phrasing and their relevance to modern lifestyle, these "trainings" provide a valuable foundation of ethics for all of humanity.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings

-First Training-

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.

-Second Training-

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am committed to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.

-Third Training-

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

-Fourth Training-

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am committed to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticise or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

-Fifth Training-

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practising mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. I am committed to ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being, and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films, and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society, and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger, and confusion in myself and in society by practising a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self-transformation and for the transformation of society.

(Thich Nath Hanh, www.plumvillage.org)

Karma and Rebirth

The wheel of life, or "samsara", is an ancient symbol that has the same meaning in Buddhism and Hinduism. It is symbolises the cycle of birth, life, and death. When one revolution of the wheel is completed, life begins again with rebirth.

What is karma?

Karma is a Sanskrit word that literally means "action". The word is used to refer to volitional acts as well as the fruits or consequences that arise from these acts. The idea of karma had existed in ancient Indian philosophy before the time of Siddhartha Gautama, and it became an important element of Buddhist philosophy.

The Hindu and Buddhist concepts of karma are quite similar, although Hinduism makes a further distinction between different types of karma, such as present karma, latent karma, and future karma. In the understanding of both thought systems, the law of karma describes the connection between actions and the resulting forces, as follows: wholesome actions lead to wholesome states while unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome states, individually as well as collectively.

The ethical dimension.

To make this more intelligible, one has to account for (un)wholesome actions and (un)wholesome states and their respective meaning in Buddhism. The former is outlined in the Noble Eightfold Path. Action springs from volition, which springs from intention, which springs from thought, and so forth. The quality of actions can be described in ethical terms, simply as either good or bad, or both good and bad, or indifferent.

There are various grades of ethical qualities; and most people have an intuitive understanding that enables them to discern between good and bad, although the discerning ability depends on the person's state of mental development. A wise person at a high level of mental development can clearly discern mental activities and actions in an ethical dimension, while a deluded person has difficulties or is even unable to do so.

Good and bad vs. skilful and unskilful.

Wherever the three defilements - delusion, greed, and aversion - are present, they blur the view and increase the level of confusion in the individual or group. Consequently, if the defilements are present, there is a low level of skill in distinguishing between good and bad actions. Thus it makes sense to say that we have skilful (good) and unskilful (bad) thoughts, we speak skilful (good) and unskilful (bad) words, and we act either in a skilful (good) or in an unskilful (bad) way.

The Buddhist Precepts and the Ten Perfections give concrete meaning to good and bad and explain skilful and unskilful volitional acts in detail. Since everything in Buddhism is interrelated, the Eightfold Path must be seen in connection with the Four Noble Truths, the concept of karma, and the tenet of rebirth.

Moral quality of volitional acts determines karma.

The law of karma states that there is a connection between the moral quality, the level of skill in volitional actions, and the resulting states. What we are is determined largely by what we thought, said and did in the past, while what we are thinking, saying, and doing now will form our future. The karma of past, present, and future events are connected by the law of cause and effect.

For instance, if one generates bad karma by hurting or killing sentient beings, one will have to endure the negative consequences of these deeds in this or another lifetime. Similarly, if one generates good karma by observing the precepts, positive consequences will follow inevitably.

Buddhists understand karma as a natural law. There is no higher instance, no judgement, no divine intervention, and no gods that steer man's destiny, but only the law of karma itself, which works on a universal scale. Deeds yield consequences either in the next second, in the next hour, day, month, year, decade, or even in the next lifetime, or in another distant lifetime. To illustrate this, consider the following example describing a sequence of volitional acts, which yield instant karmic results:

Example: The arising of volition and karma.

An unpleasant sensation occurs. A thought arises that the source of the unpleasantness was a person. This thought is a delusion; any decisions based upon it will therefore be unskilful. A thought arises that some past sensations of unpleasantness issued from this same person. This thought is a further delusion. This is followed by a wilful decision to speak words that will produce an unpleasant sensation in that which is perceived as a person. This decision is an act of hostility.

Of all the events described so far, only the last is called karma. Words are carefully chosen in the hopes that when heard they will cause pain. The words are pronounced aloud. This is the execution of the decision to be hostile. It may also be classed as a kind of karma, although technically it is after-karma.

There is a visual sensation of a furrowed brow and turned down mouth. The thought arises that the other person's face is frowning. The thought arises that the other person's feelings were hurt. There is a fleeting joyful feeling of success in knowing that one has scored a damaging verbal blow.

Eventually, perhaps much later, there is an unpleasant sensation of regret, perhaps taking the form of a sensation of fear that the perceived enemy may retaliate, or perhaps taking the form of remorse on having acted impetuously, like an immature child, and hoping that no one will remember this childish action. This regret or fear is the unpleasant ripening of the karma, the unskilful decision to inflict pain through words.

Rebirth.

Buddhists hold that the retributive process of karma can span more than one lifetime. Rebirth has always been an important tenet in Buddhism; and it is often referred to as walking the wheel of life (samsara). It is the process of being born over and over again in different times and different situations, possibly for many thousand times.

As long as there is delusion, greed, and aversion, and as long as passions are not extinguished, we generate karma. Because we eventually accumulate unmaterialised karma , there is a next lifetime in which the accumulated karma will take form. Only when all accumulated karma is realised and the generation of new karma is calmed, one can enter the stream that leads to Nirvana. This process continues until Nirvana is reached, which signifies the cessation of rebirth and, hence, the end of suffering.

It is notable that this also entails the avoidance of "good karma". Once the stream that leads to Nirvana is entered, creating wholesome karma is not an object anymore. Although wholesome karma leads to entering the stream, it does not lead to Nirvana, only the extinguishment of all karma leads to Nirvana.

The Non-Self.

The concept of rebirth is unfamiliar to most Western people. Its philosophical and traditional foundation is found in India, where the theory of transmigration of souls had presumably existed long before it was written down in the Upanishads around 300 BC.

The Buddhist concept is subtly different from the classical Indian understanding, because it denies the existence of a self or a soul. In Buddhism, the idea of self is merely an illusion. Man wrongly identifies perception, consciousness, mind and body with what he calls self. In reality, there is no abiding entity that could be identified with a self, because the states of perception, consciousness, and mind and body constantly change.

The body is mortal and when it dies, all mental activities cease. That is why there is no soul. The idea of soul is simply an extension of the self; in fact it is an immortal version of the self that supposedly survives physical death. Buddhism denies the existence of such an entity. Instead, what we call self is just a stream of consciousness that draws identity from concepts and memories, all of which are impermanent.

The idea of an abiding self is deceptive, because it is derived from unenlightened reasoning. The word self simply provides a reference frame for the mind-body phenomena of sentient beings. We usually identify it with our body and the stream of consciousness that is sustained by sense perceptions and thoughts. In reality, what we call self is neither abiding nor detached from the rest of the world and other beings. Buddhists call this the "neither self nor non-self".

What is reborn if not the "self"?

If the idea of non-self sounds odd, then it must sound even more curious that non-self can be reborn. There is a seeming contradiction between the canon of rebirth and that of the non-self, which even many Buddhists find difficult to understand. The contradiction is, however, only on the surface and can be solved if one pictures the self as the result of karmic formation. This can be put into less abstract words:

If we imagine the world as an ocean, we are like the ripples on the ocean. Formations like ripples and waves occur, because of wind, tides, and other kinetic forces. In the Buddhist analogy, the universe is in motion due to karmic forces. A ripple, a wave, or a billow may seem as an individual entity for a moment, creating the illusion that it has a self, but it is gone in the next moment. The truth is that all individuals are one. A ripple is a temporary phenomenon; it is just water in motion. We know that kinetic energy causes wave forms on a body of water and it would be ridiculous to say that a single ripple or wave has a self.

Similarly, in case of beings, the process of coming into life and being conditioned in a particular way is caused by karmic forces. The up and down of the ocean's waves corresponds with the rotation of the wheel of life. The sea that surges, falls, and resurges, is the life that is born, dies, and is reborn again. It is therefore obvious that we should not focus on the temporary phenomenon of the wave, but on the force that causes, forms, and drives it. Nothing else is said, although in more practical terms, in the Eightfold Path.

Emptiness

Emptiness is a key concept in Buddhist philosophy, or more precisely, in the ontology of Mahayana Buddhism. The phrase “form is emptiness; emptiness is form” is perhaps the most celebrated paradox associated with Buddhist philosophy. It is the supreme mantra. The expression originates from the Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra, commonly known as the Heart Sutra, which contains the philosophical essence of about six hundred scrolls making up the Maha Prajna Paramita. The Heart Sutra is the shortest text in this collection. It belongs to the oldest Mahayana texts and presumably originated in India around the time of Jesus Christ.

The Heart Sutra.
Translation by Edward Conze

Homage to the Perfection of Wisdom, the Lovely, the Holy!

Avalokita, The Holy Lord and Bodhisattva, was moving in the deep course of the Wisdom which has gone beyond. He looked down from on high, He beheld but five heaps, and he saw that in their own-being they were empty.

Here, Sariputra, form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form, the same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness.

Here, Sariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness; they are not produced or

stopped, not defiled or immaculate, not deficient or complete.

Therefore, Sariputra, in emptiness there is no form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness; No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; No forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touchables or objects of mind; No sight-organ element, and so forth, until we come to: No mind-consciousness element; There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, and so forth, until we come to: there is no decay and death, no extinction of decay and death. There is no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path. There is no cognition, no attainment and non-attainment.

Therefore, Sariputra, it is because of his non-attainment that a Bodhisattva, through having relied on the Perfection of Wisdom, dwells without thought-coverings. In the absence of thought-coverings he has not been made to tremble, he has overcome what can upset, and in the end he attains to Nirvana.

All those who appear as Buddhas in the three periods of time fully awake to the utmost, right and perfect Enlightenment because they have relied on the Perfection of Wisdom.

Therefore one should know the prajnaparamita as the great spell, the spell of great knowledge, the utmost spell, the unequalled spell, allayer of all suffering, in truth - for what could go wrong? By the prajnaparamita has this spell been delivered. It runs like this:

> Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond, O what an awakening, all-hail!

Translations and commentary.

Avalokita = Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion
Sariputra = disciple of the Buddha
sunyata = emptiness, void
prajna = wisdom
paramita = that which has reached the other shore
prajnaparamita = wisdom acquired experientially, by means of intuitive insight, and perfected through cultivation to the level of transcendental knowledge
hridaya = heart
nirvana = ultimate attainment
bodhi = awakened mind
sattva = being

According to Buddhist scholars, the dialogue between Avalokiteshvara and Sariputra is inspired by the Buddha. This is to say it occurs spontaneously without the speaker's intention. The content of the conversation is determined entirely by the power of the Buddha's concentration. The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara represents the idea of perfect universal wisdom, while Sariputra is regarded as one of the Buddha's closest and brightest disciples. The dialogue takes place at the Vulture Peak near the ancient city of Rajgaya where the Buddha and his community of monks stayed. Sariputra requests Avalokiteshvara to instruct him on the practice of the perfection of wisdom, which means prajnaparamita in Sanskrit.

The perfection of wisdom refers to the wisdom that directly and intuitively understands the ultimate nature of phenomena. Sariputra answers with the profound words, "Emptiness is form; form is emptiness," and proceeds to state the emptiness of the five aggregates (skandhas), the emptiness of the teachings (dharmas), and the emptiness of all phenomena. The sutra ends with the celebrated mantra "gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha" which can be translated with "Homage to the awakened mind which has gone over to the other shore." *The one who has gone over* means: the enlightened one, who has done away with views, ideas, and perceptions and who looks upon reality without any obstructions of mind.

What is emptiness?

The Buddhist notion of emptiness is often misunderstood as nihilism. Unfortunately, 19th century Western philosophy has contributed much to this misconstruction. Meanwhile Western scholars have acquired enough knowledge about Buddhism to realise that this view is far from accurate. The only thing that nihilism and the teaching of emptiness can be said to have in common is a sceptical outset. While nihilism concludes that reality is unknowable, that nothing exists, that nothing meaningful can be communicated about the world, the Buddhist notion of emptiness arrives at just the opposite, namely that ultimate reality is knowable, that there is a clear-cut ontological basis for phenomena, and that we can communicate and derive useful knowledge from it about the world. Emptiness (sunyata) must not be confused with nothingness. Emptiness is not non-existence and it is not non-reality.

What is emptiness then? To understand the philosophical meaning of this term, let's look at a simple solid object, such as a cup. How is a cup empty? We usually say that a cup is empty if it does not contain any liquid or solid. This is the ordinary meaning of emptiness. But, is the cup really empty? A cup empty of liquids or solids is still full of air. To be precise, we must therefore state what the cup is empty of. Can a cup be empty of all substance? A cup in a vacuum does not contain any air, but it still contains space, light, radiation, as well as its own substance. Hence, from a physical point of view, the cup is always full of something. Yet, from the Buddhist point of view, the cup is always empty. The Buddhist understanding of emptiness is different from the physical meaning. The cup being empty means that it is devoid of inherent existence.

What is meant with non-inherent existence? Is this to say that the cup does not ultimately exist? – Not quite. – The cup exists, but like everything in this world, its existence depends on other phenomena. There is nothing in a cup that is inherent to that specific cup or to cups in general. Properties such as being hollow, spherical, cylindrical, or leak-proof are not intrinsic to cups. Other objects which are not cups have similar properties, as for example vases and glasses. The cup's properties and components are neither cups themselves nor do they imply cupness on their own. The material is not the cup. The shape is not the cup. The function is not the cup. Only all these aspects together make up the cup. Hence, we can say that for an object to be a cup we require a collection of specific conditions to exist. It depends on the combination of function, use, shape, base material, and the cup's other aspects. Only if all these conditions exist simultaneously does the mind impute cupness to the object. If one condition ceases to exist, for instance, if the cup's shape is altered by breaking it, the cup forfeits some or all of its cupness, because the object's function, its shape, as well as the imputation of cupness through perception is disrupted. The cup's existence thus depends on external circumstances. Its physical essence remains elusive.

Those readers who are familiar with the theory of ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato will notice that this is pretty much the antithesis to Plato's idealism. Plato holds that there is an ideal essence of everything, e.g. cups, tables, houses, humans, and so on. Perhaps we can give

Plato some credit by assuming that the essence of cups ultimately exists in the realm of mind. After all, it is the mind that perceives properties of an object and imputes cupness onto one object and tableness onto another. It is the mind that thinks "cup" and "table". Does it follow that the mind is responsible for the existence of these objects? – Apparently, the mind does not perceive cups and tables if there is no visual and tactile sensation. And, there cannot be visual and tactile sensation if there is no physical object. The perception thus depends on the presence of sensations, which in turn relies on the presence of the physical object. This is to say that the cup's essence is not in the mind. It is neither to be found in the physical object. Obviously, its essence is neither physical nor mental. It cannot be found in the world, not in the mind, and certainly not in any heavenly realm, as Plato imagined. We must conclude that the objects of perception have therefore no inherent existence.

If this is the case for a simple object, such as a cup, then it must also apply to compound things, such as cars, houses, machines, etc. A car, for example, needs a motor, wheels, axles, gears, and many other things to work. Perhaps we should consider the difference between man-made objects, such as cups, and natural phenomena, such as earth, plants, animals, and human beings. One may argue that lack of inherent existence of objects does not imply the same for natural phenomena and beings. In case of a human being, there is a body, a mind, a character, a history of actions, habits, behaviour, and other things we can draw upon to describe a person. We can even divide these characteristics further into more fundamental properties. For example, we can analyse the mind and see that there are sensations, cognition, feelings, ideas. Or, we can analyse the brain and find that there are neurons, axons, synapses, and neurotransmitters. However, none of these constituents describe the essence of the person, the mind, or the brain. Again, the essence remains elusive.

Emptiness of the five skandhas.

The Heart Sutra expresses the same idea by stating the emptiness of the five skandhas, i.e. the emptiness of the body, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. The five skandhas are commonly translated into English as the *five aggregates*. According to the Buddha, these aggregates are what constitutes a person. As adumbrated above, it is possible to deconstruct the five skandhas in the same manner as objects. However, this method of deconstruction assumes a third person perspective. It analyses phenomena perceived as external to the observer. When we talk about the essence of a person, the situation is slightly different, because we talk indirectly about ourselves. It may therefore be more intuitive to look at things from a first person perspective. The first person perspective allows us to make statements about the internal state of the observer thereby producing self-reference. What is observed is the observer. Perhaps this will lead to new insights into the essence of mind and body.

First, let's look at experience. What exactly is experience? – Obviously, we experience objects and phenomena through the senses. This is one form of experience. We also experience feelings, moods, thoughts, and emotions. The former can be called sensory experiences and the latter mental experiences. Upon contemplating the distinction we may find that there is no clear boundary between sensory and mental experience. As soon as we perceive a physical object, for example an apple, the corresponding mental experiences are immediately triggered. First, we think "apple". This is identification. Following this thought, a number of things we associate with apples may come to mind, for example "sweet, edible, green, red, healthy, delicious, juicy," and so on. These associations may be followed by the build-up of a desire to touch or to taste the apple. Once the desire is strong enough, our thoughts may be occupied with consuming the apple and we start weighing the merits and demerits of consuming the apple now or later. All these mental experiences are caused by, yet independent of the original object. If the apple is withdrawn, the memory of it may be able to sustain the chain of thoughts for a short time, yet it will eventually cease.

We can infer that mental experience requires sensory experience, or respectively memory of sensory experience. Sensory experience in turn requires the body. If we carried through a thought experiment and examined whether each of the skandhas is able to exist without the other four, we would find that this is not possible. The latter four aggregates all depend on the body. Without the brain and the nervous system there is no consciousness, no sensation, no perception, and no mental formations. On the other hand, we cannot imagine the body to function without the mind. The body and the mind depend on each other, the five skandhas depend on each other. We must conclude that none of the skandhas is fundamental. Body, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are interrelated. Experiences emerge from the interaction of all five skandhas. Just as objects, experiences are conditioned by the interplay of multiple phenomena. Experience has no inherent existence either.

Our brain is advanced enough to reflect on its experiences. By means of self-reference we can direct mental activity onto itself. For example, we can think about thought. From this arises a division between subject, percept, and object. The percept is the mental impression, the subject is the owner of it, the thinker, and the object is that which causes the mental impression. This threefold division seems so natural to us that it is reflected in the grammar of most human languages. We perceive the separation of subject, percept, and object as real, because mind attributes an owner to experience and thought. This owner is the "self", the subject, the centre of consciousness, the supposed psychological entity. Surprisingly, this entity remains completely undetectable. Body, feeling, perception, and mental formations are not the self. Consciousness is not the self either, otherwise it would follow that the self temporarily ceases to exist during unconscious states, for example during deep sleep.

We might ask how "self" can be independent of a surrounding world. Is it possible for the self to exist in a mental vacuum, a world devoid of sense impressions, thought, and mental images? Would the self not literally run out of fuel if it lacked thoughts and contents to identify itself with or to set itself apart from? It seems there is no basis an independent entity. It seems more that the self is an emergent phenomenon arising from the application of complex interpretative schemes to perception. In particular, it arises from the conceptual division between subject, object, and percept. Through introspection it is possible to realise that the "self" is not fundamental. It is created by the mind through identification and discernment. The "self" is itself a mental formation – a product of mind. It is therefore empty of inherent existence.

The emptiness of matter.

The ancient Greeks believed that matter is composed of indivisible small elements with certain characteristics, such as the characteristics of earth, water, air, and fire. They called these elements atoms and they held that atoms were solid and fundamental, like microscopic billiard balls. Ernest Rutherford invalidated the billiard ball theory by conducting an experiment, which suggested that atoms have an internal structure. He established that atoms have a nucleus containing most of its mass and that electrons orbit the nucleus. Moreover, he established that the nucleus of an atom is only about one ten-thousandth of the diameter of the atom itself, which means that 99.99% of the atom's volume consists of empty space. This is the first manifestation of emptiness at the subtle level of matter. Not long after Rutherford's discovery, physicists found out that the nucleus of an atom likewise has an internal structure and that the protons and neutrons making up the nucleus are composed of even smaller particles, which they named quarks after a poem of James Joyce. Interestingly, quarks are hypothesised as geometrical points in space, which implies that atoms are essentially empty. This is the second manifestation of emptiness at the subtle level of matter.

The terms "quarks" and "points in space" still suggest something solid, since they can be imagined as irreducible mass particles. Yet, quantum field theory does away even with this

finer concept of solidity by explaining particles in the terms of field properties. Quantum electrodynamics (QED) has produced an amazingly successful theory of matter by combining quantum theory, classical field theory, and relativity. No discrepancies between the predictions of QED and experimental observation have ever been found. According to QED, subatomic particles are indistinguishable from fields, whereas fields are basically properties of space. In this view, a particle is a temporary local densification of a field, which is conditioned by the properties of the surrounding space. Ergo, matter is not different from space. This is the third manifestation of emptiness at the subtle level of matter.

An important class of phenomena in the subatomic world is defined by the various interactions between particles. In fact, there is no clear distinction between the notions of phenomena, particles, and interactions, although interactions can be described clearly in mathematical terms. For example, there are interactions between free electrons by means of photons that result in an observed repelling force. There are also interactions between the quarks of a nucleon by means of mesons, interactions between the neighbouring neutrons or protons, interactions between nucleus and electrons, and interactions between the atoms of molecules. The phenomena themselves -the nucleon, the nucleus, the atom, the molecule- are sufficiently described by these interactions, meaning by the respective equations, which implies that interactions and phenomena are interchangeable terms. Interestingly, the interrelations of quantum physics do not describe actual existence. Instead they predict the potential for existence. A manifest particle, such as an electron, cannot be described in terms of classical mechanics. It exists as a multitude of superposed “scenarios”, of which one or another manifests only when it is observed, i.e. upon measurement. Therefore, matter does not inherently exist. It exists only as interrelations of “empty” phenomena whose properties are determined by observation. This is the fourth manifestation of emptiness at the subtle level of matter.

Emptiness in mathematics.

In mathematics the notion of emptiness finds expression in the number zero, as well as in contemporary set theory. The concept of zero was discovered in India prior to the sixth century A.D. The “Arabic” number system we use today is neither Arabic nor Greek in origin. In fact, the digits 0123456789 go back to India where they were first created. The ancient Indian number system distinguished itself from other positional systems by virtue of allowing the use of zero as a legitimate number. Interestingly, the number zero did not exist in Greek mathematics, because the Greeks were essentially geometricians and had no use for the mathematical concept of a non-entity, neither did it exist in Egyptian mathematics. The Arabs, who encountered the Indian number system during their early conquests in India, found it superior to their own traditional system which used letters, and thus adapted it to develop Islamic mathematics. The Arabic word for zero is “sifr”, meaning “empty.” In the 12th century, the Italian mathematician Leonardo Pisano Fibonacci studied Arabian algebra and introduced the Hindu-Arabic numerals to Europe. The word “sifr” thus became “zephirum” in Latin and “zero” in English.

In the ancient Indian context, the number zero did not originally refer to nothingness or nullity. The Sanskrit word for zero is shūnya, which means “puffed up, hollow, empty.” The zero stands for emptiness suggestive of potentiality. The discovery of the mathematical zero concurred with the emptiness of prajna-intuition in India around 200 BC. Both signify polar opposition between being and nonbeing. Zero is that which contains all possible polarised pairs such as (+1, -1), (+2, -2), etc. It is the collection of all mutually cancelling pairs of forward and backward movements. Put it another way, zero is fundamental to all existence. Because of it, everything is possible. Zero is the additive identity, the focal point of all numbers; without it, numbers cannot be created. India alone, among the great civilisations of

antiquity, was able to fathom the depth of emptiness and willing to accept its consequences in mathematics.

Following the introduction of the Hindu-Arabic numerals into Western culture, zero became a number that was used in calculations like any other number. Consequently, it lost some part of its original meaning, namely the part that suggests potentiality. Today, most mathematicians do not associate the notion of emptiness with zero, but with the empty set, which is a construct of set theory. A set is a collection of objects or numbers. For example, the set { 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 } is a set of numbers containing five elements; it is therefore said to have the "cardinality" of 5. The empty set { } is a collection that contains nothing and has the cardinality 0. The mathematician John von Neumann (1923) invented a method, known as *von Neumann hierarchy*, which can be employed to generate the natural numbers from the empty set as follows:

Step 0:	{ }	(empty set)
Step 1:	{ { } }	(set containing the empty set)
Step 2:	{ { }, { { } } }	(set containing previous two sets)
Step 3:	{ { }, { { } } , { { }, { { } } } }	(set containing previous three sets)
Step 4:	{ { }, { { } } , { { }, { { } } }, { { }, { { } } , { { }, { { } } } } }	(etc.)

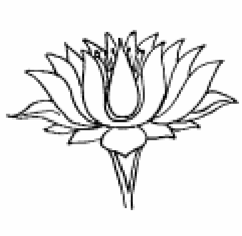
This sequence is obtained by iterating a functor that creates a new set from the union of the preceding two sets, thus generating sets with the cardinalities 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, ad infinitum. In less mathematical terms, the principle can be described as follows: Beginning with emptiness (step 0), we observe emptiness. Through the act of observing we create an entity containing emptiness (step 1). Now we perceive emptiness, as well as an entity. From the combination of the former two we create another entity by observation, which is different from the first entity (step 2). This process is repeated again and again. Interestingly, if we define suitable operations on the obtained sets based on union and intersection, the cardinalities of the resulting sets behave just like natural numbers being added and subtracted. The sequence is therefore isomorphic to the natural numbers – a stunningly beautiful example of something from nothing.

Emptiness of emptiness.

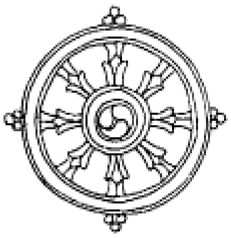
In *The Art of Living* (2001) the 14th Dalai Lama says, "As your insight into the ultimate nature of reality is deepened and enhanced, you will develop a perception of reality from which you will perceive phenomena and events as sort of illusory, illusion-like, and this mode of perceiving reality will permeate all your interactions with reality. [...] Even emptiness itself, which is seen as the ultimate nature of reality, is not absolute, nor does it exist independently. We cannot conceive of emptiness as independent of a basis of phenomena, because when we examine the nature of reality, we find that it is empty of inherent existence. Then if we are to take that emptiness itself is an object and look for its essence, again we will find that it is empty of inherent existence. Therefore the Buddha taught the emptiness of emptiness."

Buddhist Symbols and Mudras

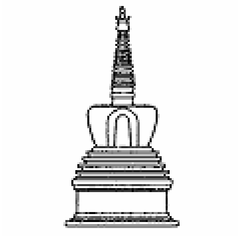
Since the making of human images of the Buddha was considered sacrilegious for a long time, Buddhist visual art has produced an elaborate vocabulary of symbolic and iconic forms of expressions. A great variety of Buddhist symbols is found in temples and in Buddhist visual art and literature. The following eight figures are among the more common ones. The lotus, the wheel, and the stupa can be seen in almost every Buddhist temple. One may understand these symbols as visual mantras. Contemplating these figures is an exercise in meditation to establish inner contact with the aspect that is represented.



Lotus Flower
Padma - Symbol of Purity. Can be of any colour except blue.



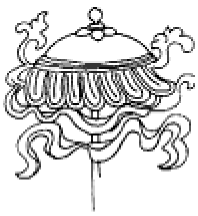
Dharmachakra
The wheel of the law. The eight spokes represent the eightfold path.



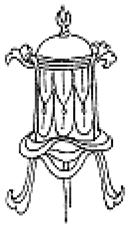
Stupa
The stupa is a symbolic grave monument where relics or the ashes of a holy monk are kept. It also symbolises the universe.



Triratana
The three jewels - the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.



Chattra
A parasol - protection against all evil; high rank.



Dhvaja
Banner - the victory of the Buddha's teachings.



Deer
The deer -usually in pairs- symbolises the first sermon of the Buddha which was held in the deer park of Benares.



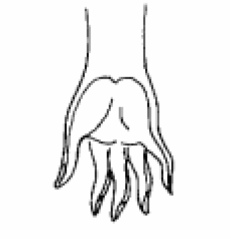
Naga
The snake king. Vestige of pre-Buddhist fertility rituals and protector of the Buddha and the Dhamma.

Mudras

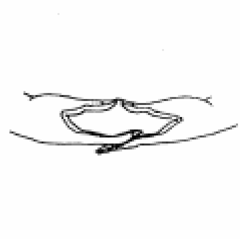
Images of the Buddha were produced from the fifth century onwards. The sacred nature of the representation is reflected in the artistic goal of creating an aura of equanimity, perfection, and holiness. The large number of rules governing the execution of a portrayal or a statue require an erudite understanding of Buddhist symbolism. Any Buddha figure made by a skilled artist exhibits a multitude of characteristics that communicate subtle meanings and intentions to the viewer. The most important of these characteristics are perhaps the mudras, or hand gestures, of the Buddha. These well-defined gestures have a fixed meaning throughout all styles and periods of Buddha images.



Bhumisparsa Mudra
Touching the earth as Gautama did, to invoke the earth as witness to the truth of his words.



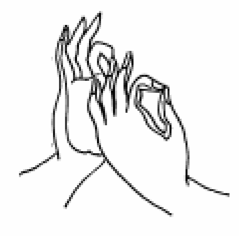
Varada Mudra
Fulfilment of all wishes; the gesture of charity.



Dhyana Mudra
The gesture of absolute balance, of meditation. The hands are relaxed in the lap, and the tips of the thumbs and fingers touch each other. When depicted with a begging bowl this is a sign of the head of an order.



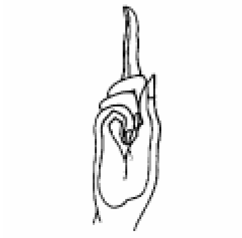
Abhaya Mudra
Gesture of reassurance, blessing, and protection. "Do not fear."



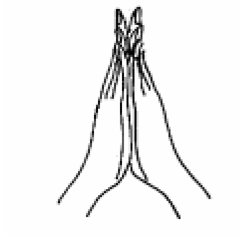
Dharmachakra Mudra
The gesture of teaching usually interpreted as turning the Wheel of Law. The hands are held level with the heart, the thumbs and index fingers form circles.



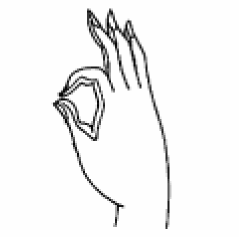
Vitarka Mudra
Intellectual argument, discussion. The circle formed by the thumb and index finger is the sign of the Wheel of Law.



Tarjani Mudra
Threat, warning. The extended index finger is pointed at the opponent.



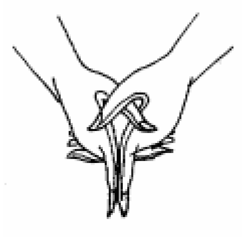
Namaskara Mudra
Gesture of greeting, prayer, and adoration. Buddhas no longer make this gesture because they do not have to show devotion to anything.



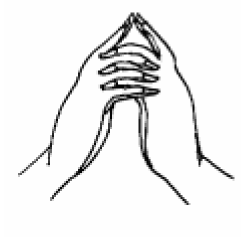
Jnana Mudra
Teaching. The hand is held at chest level and the thumb and index finger again form the Wheel of Law.



Karana Mudra
Gesture with which demons are expelled.



Ksepana Mudra
Two hands together in the gesture of 'sprinkling' the nectar of immortality.



Uttarabodhi Mudra
Two hands placed together above the head with the index fingers together and the other fingers intertwined. The gesture of supreme enlightenment.

Meditation Instructions in the Thai Theravada Tradition

Meditation is a centrepiece of Buddhist practice. It is a method to develop the mind. The emphasis is on concentration, focus, clarity, calmness, and insight. There are different techniques; most of them are easy to learn and very useful in daily life. The following text is an introduction to *samatha-vipassana* meditation in the Thai Theravada tradition (adapted with minor amendments from the Bung Wai Forest Monastery, Thailand).

Introduction to Insight Meditation

The purpose of Insight Meditation is not to create a system of beliefs, but rather to give guidance on how to see clearly into the nature of the mind. In this way one gains first-hand understanding of the way things are, without reliance on opinions or theories - a direct experience, which has its own vitality. It also gives rise to the sense of deep calm that comes from knowing something for oneself beyond any doubt.

The term Insight Meditation (samatha-vipassana) refers to practices for the mind that develop calm (samatha) through sustained attention and insight (vipassana) through reflection. A fundamental technique for sustaining attention is focusing awareness on the body; traditionally, this is practice while sitting or walking. This guide begins with some advice on this technique.

Reflection occurs quite naturally afterwards, when one is 'comfortable' within the context of the meditation exercise. There will be a sense of ease and interest, and one begins to look around and become acquainted with the mind that is meditating. This 'looking around' is called contemplation, a personal and direct seeing that can only be suggested by any technique.

Sustaining Attention

Sitting

Focusing the mind on the body can be readily accomplished while sitting. You need to find a time and a place which affords you calm and freedom from disturbance. A quite room with not much in it to distract the mind is ideal. Timing is also important. It is not especially productive to meditate when you have something else to do or when you're pressed for time. It's better to set aside a period - say in the early morning or in the evening after work-when you can really give your full attention to the practice.

Begin with fifteen minutes or so. Practice sincerely with the limitations of time and available energy, and avoid becoming mechanical about the routine. Meditation practice, supported by genuine willingness to investigate and make peace with oneself, will develop naturally in terms of duration and skill.

Awareness of the Body

The development of calm is aided by stability, and by a steady but peaceful effort. If you can't feel settled, there is no peacefulness; if there is no effort, you tend to daydream. One of the most effective postures for the cultivation of the proper balance of stillness and energy is the sitting posture.

Use a posture that will keep your back straight without strain. A simple upright chair may be helpful, or you may be able to use the lotus posture. These postures may look awkward at first, but in time they can provide a unique balance of gentle firmness that gladdens the mind without tiring the body.

If the chin is tilted very slightly down this will help but do not allow the head to loll forward as this encourages drowsiness. Place the hands on your lap, palm upwards, one gently resting on the other with the thumb-tips touching. Take your time and get the right balance.

Now, collect your attention, and begin to move it slowly down your body. Notice the sensations in each part of your body. Relax any tensions, particularly in the face, neck and hands. Allow the eyelids to close or half close.

Investigate how you are feeling. Are you expectant or tense? Then relax your attention a little. With this, the mind will probably calm down and you may find some thoughts drifting in - reflections, daydreams, memories, or doubts about whether you are doing it right! Instead of following or contending with these thought patterns, bring more attention to the body, which is a useful anchor for a wandering mind.

Cultivate a spirit of inquiry in your meditation attitude. Take your time. Move your attention, for example, systematically from the crown of the head down over the whole body. Notice the different sensations - such as warmth, pulsing, numbness, and sensitivity - in the joints of each finger, the moisture of the palms, and the pulse in the wrist. Even areas that may have no particular sensation, such as the forearms or the earlobes can be "swept over" in an attentive way. Notice how even the lack of sensation is something the mind can be aware of. This constant and sustained investigation is called mindfulness (sati) and is one of the primary tools of Insight Meditation.

Mindfulness of breathing - anapanasati

Instead of "body sweeping", or after a preliminary period of this practice, mindfulness can be developed through attention on the breath.

First, follow the sensation of your ordinary breath as it flows in through the nostrils and fills the chest and abdomen. Then try maintaining your attention at one point, either at the diaphragm or - a more refined location - at the nostrils. Breath has a tranquilising quality, steady and relaxing if you don't force it; this is helped by an upright posture. Your mind may wander, but keep patiently returning to the breath.

It is not necessary to develop concentration to the point of excluding everything else except the breath. Rather than to create a trance, the purpose here is to allow you to notice the workings of the mind, and to bring a measure of peaceful clarity into it. The entire process - gathering your attention, noticing the breath, noticing that the mind has wandered, and re-establishing your attention - develops mindfulness, patience and insightful understanding. So don't be put off by apparent "failure" - simply begin again. Continuing in this way allows the mind eventually to calm down.

If you get very restless or agitated, just relax. Practice being at peace with yourself, listening to - without necessarily believing in - the voices of the mind.

If you feel drowsy, then put more care and attention into your body and posture. Refining your attention or pursuing tranquillity at such times will only make matters worse!

Walking and Standing

Many meditation exercises, such as the above "mindfulness of breathing", are practice while sitting. However, walking is commonly alternated with sitting as a form of meditation. Apart from giving you different things to notice, it is a skilful way to energise the practice if the calming effect of sitting is making you dull.

If you have access to some open land, measure off about 25-30 paces' length of level ground (r a clearly defined pathway between two trees), as your meditation path. Stand at one end of the path, and compose your mind on the sensations of the body. First, let the attention rest on the feeling of the body standing upright, with the arms hanging naturally and the hands lightly clasped in front or behind. Allow the eyes to gaze at a point about three meters in front of you at ground level, thus avoiding visual distraction. Now, walk gently, at a deliberate but 'normal' pace, to the end of the path. Stop. Focus on the body standing for the period of a couple of breaths. Turn, and walk back again. While walking, be aware of the general flow of physical sensations, or more closely direct your attention to the feet. The exercise for the mind is to keep bringing its attention back to the sensation of the feet touching the ground, the spaces between each step, and the feelings of stopping and starting.

Of course, the mind will wander. So it is important to cultivate patience, and the resolve to begin again. Adjust the pace to suit your state of mind - vigorous when drowsy or trapped in obsessive thought, firm but gentle when restless and impatient. At the end of the path, stop; breathe in and out; 'let go' of any restlessness, worry, calm, bliss, memories or opinions about yourself. The 'inner chatter' may stop momentarily, or fade out. Begin again. In this way you continually refresh the mind, and allow it to settle at its own rate.

In more confined spaces, alter the length of the path to suit what is available. Alternatively, you can circumambulate a room, pausing after each circumambulation for a few moments of standing. This period of standing can be extended to several minutes, using 'body sweeping'.

Walking brings energy and fluidity into the practice, so keep your pace steady and just let changing conditions pass through the mind. Rather than expecting the mind to be as still as it might be while sitting, contemplate the flow of phenomena. It is remarkable how many times we can become engrossed in a train of thought - arriving at the end of the path and 'coming to' with a start! - but it is natural for our untrained minds to become absorbed in thoughts and moods. So instead of giving in to impatience, learn how to let go, and begin again. A sense of ease and calm may then arise, allowing the mind to become open and clear in a natural, unforced way.

Lying Down

Reclining at the end of a day, spend a few minutes meditating while lying on one side. Keep the body quite straight and bend one arm up so that the hand acts as a support for the head. Sweep through the body, resting its stresses; or collect your attention on the breath, consciously putting aside memories of the day just past and expectations of tomorrow. In a few minutes, with your mind clear, you'll be able to rest well.

Cultivating The Heart

Cultivating goodwill (metta) gives another dimension to the practice of Insight. Meditation naturally teaches patience and tolerance or at least it shows the importance of these qualities. So you may well wish to develop a more friendly and caring attitude towards yourself and other people. In meditation, you can cultivate goodwill very realistically.

Focus attention on the breath, which you will now be using as the means of spreading kindness and goodwill. Begin with yourself, with your body. Visualise the breath as a light, or see your awareness as being a warm ray and gradually sweep it over your body. Lightly focus your attention on the centre of the chest, around the heart region. As you breath in, direct patient kindness towards yourself, perhaps with the thought, "May I be well", or "Peace". As you breathe out, let the mood of that thought, or the awareness of light, spread outwards from the heart, through the body, through the mind and beyond yourself. "May others be well".

If you are experiencing negative states of mind, breathe in the qualities of tolerance and forgiveness. Visualizing the breath as having a healing colour may be helpful. On the out-breath, let go of any stress, worry or negativity, and extend the sense of release through the body, the mind, and beyond, as before.

This practice can form all or part of a period of meditation - you have to judge for yourself what is appropriate. The calming effect of meditating with a kind attitude is good for beginning a sitting but there will no doubt be times to use this approach for long periods, to go deeply into the heart.

Always begin with what you are aware of, even if it seems trivial or confused. Let your mind rest calmly on that - whether it's boredom, an aching knee, or the frustration of not feeling particularly kindly. Allow these to be; practice being at peace with them. Recognise and gently put aside any tendencies towards laziness, doubt or guilt.

Peacefulness can develop into a very nourishing kindness towards yourself, if you first of all accept the presence of what you dislike. Keep the attention steady, and open the heart to whatever you experience. This does not imply the approval of negative states, but allows them a space wherein they can come and go.

Generating goodwill toward the world beyond yourself follows much the same pattern. A simple way to spread kindness is to work in stages. Start with yourself, joining the sense of loving acceptance to the movement of the breath. "May I be well." Then, reflect on people you love and respect, and wish them well, one by one. Move on to friendly acquaintances, then to those towards whom you feel indifferent. "May they be well." Finally, bring to mind those people you fear or dislike, and continue to send out wishes of goodwill.

This meditation can expand, in a movement of compassion, to include all people in the world, in their many circumstances. And remember, you don't have to feel that you love everyone in order to wish them well!

Kindness and compassion originate from the same source of good will, and they broaden the mind beyond the purely personal perspective. If you're not always trying to make things go the way you want them to: if you're more accepting and receptive to yourself and others as they are, compassion arises by itself. Compassion is the natural sensitivity of the heart.

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